DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 858 CG 017 113

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TITLE What Does the Just World Scale Measure: Dimension or Style?
PUB DATE 27 Aug 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Mapping; *Cognitive Style; College Students; Justice; Psychological Patterns; Quality of Life; Responses; *Test Validity; Well Being
IDENTIFIERS *Just World Hypothesis; *Just World Scale (Rubin and Peplau)

ABSTRACT

Rubin and Peplau's Just World Scale is based on the belief that a just world is a unidimensional construct in which individual beliefs are polarized according to immanent justice or ultimate justice. To investigate the effect of personal style on just world view, 109 male and female college students (who previously had completed the Just World Scale) completed a 22-item questionnaire assessing their optimism for the future; they were first made aware of either the relatively privileged or deprived aspects of their present status. An analysis of the results showed that subjects who scored high on the Just World Scale generalized their present status into the future in order to maintain their belief in immanent justice. Subjects who scored low on the Just World Scale responded to injustice from an ultimate justice perspective where present privilege or deprivation was expected to be compensated for in the future. These findings suggest that the Just World Scale may be more accurately viewed as a measure of the defensive styles people use for protecting their belief in a just world than as a measure of commitment to the belief. (Author/BL)

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ED237858

What Does the Just World Scale Measure: Dimension or Style?

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington D.C., August 27, 1982.

CG 017113

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduates whose scores fell above and below the median on the Rubin and Peplau (1975) Just World Scale completed a questionnaire assessing their optimism for the future after being made aware of either the relatively privileged or deprived aspects of their present status. The data provided partial support for the hypothesis that High JW subjects would generalize their present status into the future in order to maintain their belief in immanent justice. Low JW individuals' responses to injustice were interpretable from an ultimate justice perspective where present privilege or deprivation was expected to be compensated for in the future. These findings were interpreted as suggesting that the Just World Scale is more accurately viewed as a measure of defensive styles people use for protecting their belief in a just world than as a measure of commitment to the belief.

This paper, as the title attests, is concerned with differences between people in their orientation to the theme of justice in their lives. In anticipation of the discussion to follow, the reader is encouraged to consider his or her own agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

1. It is rare for an innocent person to be wrongly sent to jail.
2. Crime doesn't pay.
3. People who meet with misfortune often have brought it on themselves.
4. By and large, people deserve what they get.
5. Basically, the world is a just place.

As you might have guessed by now, these five statements are in fact taken from the Just World Scale developed by Rubin and Peplau (1975). According to the rationale for the scale, if you found yourself agreeing with these statements, you probably have a commitment to the belief that you live in a just world where it is possible to harvest the fruits of your labours; where people get what they deserve.

But what if you found yourself hesitant to accept the simplistic orientation to justice implied in these statements? Is it correct to conclude that your reluctance reflects your awareness that the world is often cruel and capricious; that realistically speaking, the world is best characterized as an unjust place? Once again, Rubin and Peplau's rationale for developing the scale supports this in-

terpretation of what a low score on the scale means. For Rubin and Peplau, the belief in a just world represents a simplistic orientation to life maintained by individuals whose protected childhoods left naive beliefs about the goodness of authority figures and wickedness of losers unchallenged. Accordingly, for those who are unable to escape exposure to injustice as they grow up, the belief in a just world is eventually relinquished. Abandoning the belief in a just world makes it difficult to accept statements such as "crime doesn't pay" since any realistic assessment of criminal activity in our society would suggest that statements such as this are at best half-truths.

In summary, Rubin and Peplau's rationale for the Just World Scale is based on their conceptualization of the belief in a just world as a unidimensional construct; or in their own words: "as an attitudinal continuum extending between the two poles of total acceptance and total rejection of the notion that the world is a just place."(p. 66).

Rubin and Peplau's claim for the unidimensional nature of the belief in a just world must nevertheless be examined carefully in light of research attempting to establish the construct validity of the scale. The strongest claim that can be made on the basis of this research, is that the scale is capable of predicting individuals' expectations for what Piaget (1965) called immanent justice, where faults are expected to automatically bring about their own punishments

and virtues their own rewards. As a result, persons scoring high on the JW scale are not only acknowledging their belief in a just world but also their particular belief that the restoration of justice is invariably immediate and complete.

Viewing the High JW orientation as a particular stylistic representation of the just world, of course at the same time raises the possibility that individuals scoring low on the JW scale may not necessarily have relinquished their belief in a just world, but rather have learned to represent the "justness" of their world in a manner that available validational studies have been insensitive to.

Indeed, Lerner (1980) has recently argued that the belief in a predictable, just world is of such essential importance to our planned goal-seeking activity that it will not be relinquished easily. According to Lerner, the effect of exposure to injustice during development is one of transforming the belief in a just world rather than abandoning it. Representations of the belief in a just world after the belief in immanent justice, reflect the merging of the basic belief with other important norms, beliefs, and social concepts that define the person's social awareness. For example, the belief in ultimate justice, preserves the basic belief that in the long-run justice will ultimately prevail along with some awareness that in the short-run one must expect injustices to occur. In the present context, the belief in immanent justice makes it possible to disagree with statements

such as "crime doesn't pay", while continuing to believe in a just world, since we all know the crooks ultimately get it in the end.

The present investigation attempted to examine such a personal style interpretation of the JW scale in a context where subjects were asked to anticipate the likelihood of various postitive and negative life events in their futures, in response to evidence of injustice in their lives in the present. To the extent that people believe in immanent justice, they should respond to being made aware of their present fate by generalizing their current status into the future. In contrast, people commited to ultimate justice should expect the future to offer compensation for their present fate.

In our study, 109 male and female university students who had completed the Just World Scale earlier in the term, assessed the likelihood that 22 future events would happen to them under one of three conditions. In a relatively privileged condition, under the guise of providing background information for a study about people's expectations for the future, subjects were asked to complete a series of questions before answering the future event items that were designed to make salient ways in which their student lifestyle included activities and access to resources not widely available to others. Subjects were asked to rate for example, the importance to student life of various special ser-

vices offered by the university such as stress management groups and weight loss clinics. In a contrasting relatively deprived condition subjects answered questions making it salient that their student status was depriving them of things that would have been available to them had they not become students. One question for example, asked subjects to estimate what their present annual income would have been had they not come to university. In a control condition subjects simply completed the future event items without completing any preliminary questions. The future likelihood was then assessed for each event by having subjects rate the likelihood that the same event would happen to a person of the same sex at the same university. This rating procedure as well as the 22 life events were taken from a study of unrealistic optimism conducted by Weinstein (1980). The 22 events used are listed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Splitting subjects' Just World scores at the median, we expected that High JW subjects' preference for immanent justice would lead them to generalize their sense of either privilege or deprivation into the future. It was further expected that Low JW subjects would respond to awareness of their current fate by balancing the scales in the future. As a result, awareness of being relatively deprived was ex-

pected to increase these individuals' expectations of desireable events happening in their futures, with parallel reduced expectations of undesireable events happening. In short, the experience of current relative deprivation should lead those with an ultimate justice orientation to become more optimistic about their futures. In the same way, the belief in ultimate justice should lead to diminished optimism when the current fate of relative privilege is made salient.

Of course, if the Rubin and Peplau dimensional view of the JW Scale is correct, Low JW individuals' realistic assessment of current fate should free them from any need to construe the likelihood of future events in order to meet present deservingness concerns.

Results and Discussion

In an attempt to produce a more interpretable and reliable index of subjects' future expectations, we factor analyzed their ratings of the 22 future life events. Two factors accounting for 61% of the overall variance emerged with negative life events loading on the first factor and positive life events loading on the second factor. Since positive and negative life events loaded on different factors, we constructed two indexes for purposes of analysis, combining events that loaded .40 or greater on each of the two factors. The six life events that were included in each index and their factor loadings are listed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here.

With these two indexes of future expectations as dependent measures, we then sought to answer our initial question. Would subjects alter their future expectations in response to awareness of current injustice in their lives; and if so, would their altered expectations reflect stylistic preferences for either immanent or ultimate justice as measured by the Just World Scale? Turning first to subjects' expectations for positive life events, we found that their expectations were not significantly affected by enhanced awareness of current injustice or by individual differences as measured by the Just World Scale. One possible reason for this unexpected finding can be found in a comparison of the positive and negative life events in Table 2. Such a comparison suggests that the degree of potential injustice associated with positive events was perceived to be less than that for negative events. Being fired from a job or having a drinking problem almost guarantees victim status, whereas it is less clear that not travelling in Europe or owning a home would be perceived as injustices at this point in undergraduates' lives. As a result, distorting the likelihood of these future positive events may have been considered an inadequate corrective for current injustice.

Consistent with this interpretation, our hypothesis fared somewhat better with subjects' expectations for negative future events. The analysis of variance of the negative life event index, revealed a significant interaction between subjects' scores on the Just World Scale and their experience of current injustice, $F(2,89) = 3.63$, $p < .03$. Neither of the main effects were significant.

Insert Table 3 about here.

The means for this interaction are shown in Table 3 and are expressed as deviations from midpoint where the midpoint represents the same likelihood of experiencing a negative event as one's peers. Larger values therefore indicate less perceived likelihood of experiencing negative events and hence greater optimism.

As can be seen from the means in Table 3, subjects in the control condition who scored above the median on the Just World Scale saw themselves as less likely to experience negative life events in their futures than individuals who scored below the median. Under conditions where no clear threat exists to personal deservingness, High JW individuals are inclined to expect a future that will be less fraught with injustice than Low JW individuals, $t(89) = 1.86$, $p < .08$.

Further inspection of the means in Table 3, indicates that enhanced awareness of present fate affected High JW

subjects optimism most strongly when they felt relatively deprived. In this condition, High JW subjects anticipated that negative life events would be more likely to occur in their futures than comparable subjects in the control condition, $t(89) = 2.27$, $p < .05$. The reduced optimism displayed by High JW subjects under conditions where they were made to feel relatively priveleged was unexpected and is not readily interpretable from either a "dimensional" or "style" view of the Just World Scale.

Of greatest interest is the effect that awareness of being relatively deprived or relatively privileged had on Low JW subjects' expectations for the future. Contrary to the view of Low JW individuals as realists who take injustice in their stride, these subjects appeared to be responsive to evidence of injustice in their lives. The pattern of their altered expectations for the future in response to their current fate also suggest that they expect that justice will be restored in the form of ultimate justice. This is reflected most strongly in an increased expectation of negative events occuring when these subjects' privileged status was made salient to them and to a lesser degree in the decreased expectation that negative events will occur in the future when the current experience of being deprived was made salient. Although this pattern is consistent with an ultimate justice interpretation, it should be noted that internal analyses revealed that neither of the Low JW means in

the justice conditions were significantly different from the control, although they were significantly different from each other, $t(89) = 2.42$, $p < .02$.

In addition to contributing to a greater understanding of the constructs that the Just World Scale measure, these findings provide preliminary evidence that there may be important personal style differences in how people respond to injustice in their lives. The belief in ultimate justice apparent in our findings parallels the findings of a study conducted by Sorrentino and Hardy (1974). These authors found that the ultimate justice orientation inherent in some subjects' religious beliefs led them to be unresponsive to the plight of an innocent victim, presumably because these subjects felt that the victim's suffering would be compensated for in the future; in the ultimate scheme of things there are no innocent victims. The present findings suggest the interesting hypothesis that similar beliefs may guide some people's responses to injustice in their own lives, an hypothesis that gains at least anecdotal support from the following quotation taken from an interview with an accident victim with permanent damage to his spinal cord as reported in Bulman and Wortman (1977). To be sure, this victims response is a secular version of the belief in ultimate justice, leading him to believe that his accident was compensation for over indulgence in the good life:

> I was moving too fast at the time and I think this was the best way to slow me down ... I'd do all these dangerous things. I figure that this here

was just enough to slow me down. I think it was the best thing - maybe I'll live a little longer. (p. 359)

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The Just World Scale as a Predictor of Preference

for Immanent versus Ultimate Justice

John H. Ellard & Melvin J. Lerner

TABLE 1

Twenty-two Positive and Negative Life Events Taken From Weinstein (1980)

POSITIVE EVENTS

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1. Like postgraduation job
2. Owning your own home
3. Starting salary > $10,000
4. Traveling to Europe
5. Starting salary > $15,000
6. Good job offer before graduation
7. Graduating in top third of class
8. Home doubles in value in 5 years
9. Your work recognized with award
10. Living past 80
11. Your achievements in newspaper

NEGATIVE EVENTS

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1. Having a drinking problem
2. Attempting suicide
3. Divorced a few years after married
4. Heart attack before age 40
5. Contracting venereal disease
6. Being fired from a job
7. Getting lung cancer
8. Being sterile
9. Dropping out of college
10. Having a heart attack
11. Not finding a job for 6 months

TABLE 2

Life Events Loading .40 or Greater on Positive and Negative Life Event Factors

	NEGATIVE LIFE EVENT	FACTOR LOADING
1.	Attempting suicide	+.77
2.	Contracting venereal disease	+.72
3.	Having a drinking problem	+.68
4.	Divorced a few years after married	+.66
5.	Being fired from job	+.55
6.	Being sterile	+.44
	POSITIVE LIFE EVENT	
1.	Good job offer before graduation	+.61
2.	Like post graduation job	+.61
3.	Traveling in Europe	+.56
4.	Starting salary $15,000	+.53
5.	Owning own home	+.47
6.	Graduating in top third of class	+.42

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TABLE 3

Mean Comparative Judgement of Own Chances Versus Others

Chances of Experiencing Negative Life Events

	Present Fate		
Just World Scale	Relative Privilege	Control	Relative Deprive
Above Median Just World Score	2.66 (17)	3.44 (16)	1.96 (13)
Below Median Just World Score	1.36 (16)	2.32 (18)	2.88 (15)

Note. 1. Means are expressed as deviations from midpoint.

Larger values indicate greater optimism.

(i.e. less chance of negative events happening in future).

2. Numbers in parentheses are cell frequencies.

Interaction effect: $F(2,89) = 3.63$, $p < .03$.